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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 004006

SIPDIS

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DEPT FOR SCA/FO DAS GASTRIGHT, SCA/A, PRM
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG
NSC FOR JWOOD
OSD FOR SHIVERS
CG CJTF-82, POLAD, JICCENT

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SUBJECT: 2007 AFGHAN REFUGEE RETURNS AND LIKELY 2008 REPATRIATION
AND DEPORTATION TRENDS

REF: A. Kabul 03386

[1](#)B. Kabul 03856

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. Iran's deportations of undocumented Afghans in the spring of 2007 and Pakistan's push to repatriate its Afghan population by the end of 2009 have resulted in increased returns that put a squeeze on the fragile support system in place in Afghanistan. So far this year, UNHCR has assisted 354,078 Afghan returnees, compared to 139,804 in 2006. UNHCR has closed the 2007 repatriation operations for this season on the Pakistan border and does not anticipate (but is prepared for) another mass deportation event from Iran before spring. But with an extremely limited capacity to absorb another wave of desperately poor, unskilled, and landless refugees, Afghanistan faces enormous challenges in successfully reintegrating and supporting this returnee population. End Summary.

Who Is Returning (Or Not) And Where They Go

[1](#)2. (U) The world's largest refugee population for two decades, approximately six million Afghans fled to more than 70 countries, with the vast majority in Pakistan and Iran. UNHCR assisted 3.5 million of these refugees to return home in 2002-2005 and another million returned "spontaneously" i.e., without assistance. This flow slowed markedly in 2006 with only an additional 139,804 assisted and 248,065 spontaneous returns. The trend continued in the first months of 2007, with the humanitarian community accepting that most of those who remained abroad would resettle permanently in their countries of refuge. Over 50% of Afghans abroad were born in exile, and the majority of Afghans in Iran and Pakistan have lived there for over twenty years. Returning is now increasingly difficult for them. Of those who have returned, the majority were Pashtun (56%), Tajik (25%), and Hazara (8%), with a fairly even male/female ratio. Returnees are largely illiterate; 63% with no education at all and few job skills. Most of the uneducated returnees end up in the Eastern provinces, followed by Kunduz, Baghlan, Herat, and Kandahar.

Long-Term Afghan Refugees in Pakistan Hesitant to Leave

[1](#)3. (SBU) Pakistan had welcomed Afghan refugees when they first arrived in 1979, but that welcome cooled as Afghans were perceived as "taking over" the transport and construction sectors and blamed for Pakistan's security problem in Northwest Frontier Province,

where most camps are located. The Afghan/Pak/UNHCR Tripartite Agreement, which was extended for three years in August 2007, sets forth the principle of "voluntary, gradual, and dignified" return. The Tripartite Agreement does call for the eventual closure of Pakistan's refugee camps, home to 42% of the Afghan refugee population.

¶4. (SBU) In 2006, Pakistan registered 2.5 million Afghans, giving them a Proof of Registration (POR) card valid only through 2009. In August 2007, Pakistan tried to close the 75,000-person Jalozai camp, but UNHCR and AmEmbassies Kabul and Islamabad vigorously opposed closure so late into the repatriation season. Pakistan backed down, but Jalozai elders have promised to vacate the camp in March 2008. Pakistani officials privately acknowledge that many Afghans have no intention of voluntarily leaving their long-term home in Pakistan. They are expected to simply fade into Pakistan's economy.

The Pakistani "Push" Is Increasing

¶5. (SBU) Pakistan is stepping up forced returns, with immigration police arresting and deporting up to 500 undocumented Afghans at a time. An EC monitoring report states that one of the major motivators for current returns to Afghanistan is the fear of arrest and detention in Pakistan, particularly for non-POR holders. While Pakistan's repatriation strategy envisions 800,000 Afghans per year departing "voluntarily" from 2007 to 2009, GoP refugee officials say they will consult with the Afghan government before deporting large numbers of undocumented Afghans. The GoP stressed that it does not want to "add to [Afghanistan's problems] through a mass deportation from Pakistan," but many returnees continue to claim they were forced out by Pakistani police, even though they had nowhere to go in Afghanistan.

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Afghans in Iran Forced Home After Years of Integration

¶6. (SBU) In contrast to Pakistan's more consultative approach, Iran moved unilaterally to increase the tempo of deportations of undocumented Afghans from the border areas. (Ref A) The one million registered Afghan refugees (and 0.9 unregistered migrants) are well-integrated in Iran and generally tolerated. But Iran has deported 687,353 Afghans from 2002 to 2007, and deportations surged in Spring 2007 with 269,500 individuals, resulting in a humanitarian crisis and the Afghan Minister of Refugees and Repatriation losing his job. In October and November, Iran began implementing a "No Go Areas" policy in Sistaan-Baluchestan and four cities in Iran's northern Golestan, with the policy intended to eventually cover 19 districts throughout Iran. As of late November, Iran has deported 325,000 Afghans during 2007. Deportees were mostly single men working illegally in Iran, but some legitimate refugee families were also arrested and deported, often in the middle of the night without time to collect their belongings or notify absent family members.

¶7. (SBU) Deportations continue, though the Iranians are currently deporting less than 7,000 individuals a week, with no signs of a major increase during winter. UNHCR has developed a contingency plan in the event of a mass deportation crisis, especially since their information shows most returnees are from Afghanistan's more unstable western and southwestern provinces and may choose to camp out in Herat or Farah rather than return to these areas. Iranian registration data indicates most Afghans in Iran come from Afghanistan's relatively safe Northern and Central provinces, but many believe Iran manipulates the registration data to deflect international criticism of their forced deportations into unstable provinces. UNHCR is attempting to obtain more information from border interviews to determine to which province most people return and how vulnerable they are.

Lack of Sustainable Repatriation Contributes to Reverse Migration

¶8. (SBU) The new buzzwords of "reverse migration" and "sustainable repatriation" reflect the increasing trend of Afghans returning to Pakistan and to Iran after unsuccessful attempts to resettle in Afghanistan. The trend reflects the lack of "pull" factors to attract voluntary returns and hold returnees in Afghanistan.

Problems with the environment and refugee system impact the sustainability of returns. A snapshot of UNHCR border monitoring shows that 77% of reverse migration back into Pakistan is due to lack of livelihood opportunities in Afghanistan, mostly for day laborers. Most of these refugees had repatriated in 2007 with the one-time, increased (\$100 USD) cash assistance UNHCR provided, but it was not enough to ensure sustainable repatriation and reintegration. To stem the reverse migration, most refugee policy officials want donors to increase refugee assistance in Afghanistan to entice people to stay rather than provide more assistance in Pakistan and keep them there.

The New Minister of Refugees and Repatriation

¶9. (SBU) New Minister of Refugees and Repatriation (MORR) Sheer Mohammad Etebari has been on the job for a week and is struggling with the magnitude of the job before him. (Ref B) UNHCR is working closely with the minister to craft an action plan for MORR reform, and all the western delegations, including Post, are meeting with him unilaterally to reinforce the reform message. So far, Etebari has shown a willingness to listen and learn, which is already significant improvement over his predecessor.

Looking Ahead at 2008 Returns

¶10. (SBU) Notwithstanding some recent noises from Pakistan that it wants to close camps near the Swat Valley to stem the violence there - another instance of blaming Afghan refugees for Pakistan's security problems - UNHCR and MORR do not anticipate any major refugee movements from Pakistan until Spring 2008. From Iran, we expect deportations to pick up in February and March, the end of Iran's calendar year. The problem is that Afghanistan's harsh winter can turn even a manageable number into a bedraggled and starving humanitarian crisis. The Refugee Sections in both Islamabad and Kabul are working with UNHCR and host government

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officials to devise a plan for the spring influx. Without strong assistance and reintegration programs in Afghanistan, however, more reverse migration may occur as refugees decide that life abroad is easier, more lucrative, and relatively easy to achieve.

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